

BRITISH HUMANIST ASSOCIATION

Aspects of Humanism

An eight week course

Student Course Book

2012 Prepared for SPES and BHA by Brendan Larvor

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Introduction

Humanists have no official doctrine. Humanism is a loose family of views, united by the thought that the business of living is usually and on the whole worthwhile, and that belief in supernatural beings has nothing to offer people who are trying to live well. The thoughts gathered in these notes and lectures are not intended to supply a Humanist creed. Rather, they are an attempt to think through some of the issues that arise for Humanists today, and to present them in a way that will stimulate others to work out their own ideas. Inevitably, they reflect my own concerns and opinions. As the intention is to stimulate debate, I have in many cases left matters open. Where I offer a definite opinion, I do so in the expectation (and hope) that others will disagree with it, discuss it and improve on it. Please feel free to send me your comments at b.p.larvor@herts.ac.uk

Your course leader will organise your in-class activities and explain how your group will use these course materials. I want to make just one suggestion: bring a notebook and pen. Use it during meetings to record your thoughts about the topics under discussion and your reasons for holding (or changing) your views. If you can't make up your mind about some question, try to write down precisely what is holding you up. That way, you will build up a private journal of your thoughts about Humanism, and make connections among the topics and between the course and your prior knowledge and experience. No-one will read it or try to make you read it aloud.

There is no textbook for this course, but for each week, I have picked out a reading from a relevant book and these have been collected together in a Sourcebook accompanying this Handbook. I am grateful to Andrew Copson and the South Place Ethical Society, British Humanist Association and Rationalist Association for inviting me to prepare this course. I hope you enjoy working through it as much as I did. I am also grateful to the Humanist Philosophers' Group for giving me plenty to think about. Graduates of the University of Hertfordshire philosophy programme will recognise some of the material here.

Brendan Larvor
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Week 1: What do we mean by 'Humanism'?

1. Synopsis:

Exact definitions are necessary in engineering, but less useful in philosophy. If we ask, for example, what is Conservatism, we get a range of answers, some to do with sound money and low taxation, others emphasising traditional gender and social roles, and still others that focus on the institutions of the state. There can be no final decision about which is the real essence of Conservatism, but in spite of this vagueness, we can use the word effectively. So it is with 'humanism'.

'Humanism' has three principal senses:

- 1) Scholarship in the humanities disciplines
- 2) A movement in Renaissance thought
- 3) The joint denial of theism and nihilism

The third sense is the one that concerns us, though it has gained some of its meaning from the first two. As a campaigning movement, mid-20th century Humanism was characterised by scientific optimism. Nowadays, optimism is in shorter supply and some people blame science for contemporary social and environmental problems.

Today, humanists sometimes campaign as representing an historical tradition, more ancient than most religions and as spiritually rich as any. However, one of the cardinal virtues for humanists is rationality. By this, we usually mean rigorous argument and careful attention to the detail of evidence, especially evidence that tells against our favourite hypotheses. Therefore, we must rigorously examine the claim that there is an ancient humanist tradition that we today inherit. In fact, it is rather patchy (in the Humanist Anthology by Margaret Knight, there is a leap from Celsus, in the second century CE, to Montaigne in the sixteenth, pausing only at Averroës).

Crucially, our Humanism is specifically *liberal*. When we object to religious bodies trying to control public life, we usually do so for liberal reasons. Liberalism is a modern development, so it is unlikely that atheists, agnostics or rationalists in the ancient world were humanists just like us. However, this is no bad thing, when we consider the expedients used by the principal organised religions to sustain their continuity as institutions and cover up the historical variability of their spiritual contents. Rather than trying to present ourselves as a venerable tradition of wisdom, humanists should embrace the best of the modern world: progressive ethics, natural science and historical self-consciousness. That way, humanists are in a better position than those religious believers who take advantage of what is modern while pretending to live by something ancient.

Some of the roots of some humanist organisations lie in religion. The South Place Ethical Society originated as a dissenting chapel in 1793, and until 1834 was a Unitarian congregation. (According to Charles Darwin, his grandfather Erasmus Darwin used to describe Unitarianism as 'a feather-bed to catch a falling Christian.')

With the exception of Jim Herrick's *Humanism: an introduction* (London: Rationalist Press Association.

Revised edition, 2009), humanist publications tend to play down Humanism's connections with dissenting religion in favour of an emphasis on the radical Enlightenment and the more irreligious philosophers of the ancient world. Recognising the origins of Humanism in dissenting religion is not a concession to theism.

After all, astrology played a vital role in the development of astronomy and trigonometry, but astrology is nevertheless nonsense. It is important to be honest about our own history; we cannot claim to meet rational standards of enquiry otherwise.

Reading: Russell, Bertrand *The Faith of a Rationalist* (Knight pp. 105-7)

2. Further Reading:

Definitions of Humanism (Appendices 1 and 3 below)

Cave, Peter *Humanism*. Oxford: Oneworld, 2009.

Herrick, Jim *Humanism: An Introduction*. Rationalist Press Association, 2009 (second edition).

Norman, Richard *On Humanism*. Routledge, 2004.

Smoker, Barbara *Humanism* (Ward Lock Educational 1973) 5th edition SPES 2008

Questions on the Reading:

- (a) Is it true that “most of the social and political evils of the world arise through absence of sympathy and presence of hatred, envy or fear”?
- (b) Is there anything else we should wish for, in competition with happiness?
- (c) Is it true that “Immortality, if we could believe in it, would enable us to shake off this gloom about the physical world”?
- (d) Russell calls this *The Faith of a Rationalist*. Why ‘faith’?

Discussion questions:

1. Is there a humanist tradition?
2. Is Humanism a ‘faith’ position?
3. Must humanists be liberals?
4. Can humanists be agnostics on the question of god?
5. Can humanists be spiritual?
6. Do humanists have to believe in progress?
7. Do humanists have to be optimistic?
8. Do humanists worship humanity?

Week 2: The scientific, historical and moral cases against theism

2. Synopsis:

2.2 What do theists believe?

- The Omnis: God is all-powerful, all-knowing and infinitely loving.
- God The Creator (Deism)
- Intervention and the Age of Miracles
- Eschatology: the Great Plan
- The remote monarch and the suffering god
- Non-realist theology

One of the central thoughts of Humanists is that belief in supernatural beings has nothing to offer people how are trying to live well.

2.3 The Scientific Case Against Theism

Scientific argument tells only against those varieties of theism that trespass on scientific territory.

Christianity used to include physical doctrines, but now many theologians take care to separate religion from science. They have some justification, as Jesus does not seem to have had anything to say about scientific topics.

The struggle against creationism in education is very important, but many religious believers are not creationists. Since creationism is not a serious option for humanists, we do not advance our own thinking much by rehearsing the case against it.

There are traditional 'proofs' of the existence of God:

- The argument from design: refuted by Hume and Darwin
- The ontological argument: refuted by Kant
- The 'first cause': question-begging

We should bear in mind as we refute these arguments that they were probably not intended as 'proofs'. They all arose in contexts where religion was not under threat and did not need to demonstrate its tenets. For example, Anselm (c. 1033 – 1109) was a monk, and offered the ontological argument to other monks, who presumably did not need to be convinced of its conclusion. Anselm also said, "I believe in order that I may understand". These 'proofs' make more historical sense as attempts to give intellectual order to an already existing faith, than as demonstrations intended to convince the unpersuaded. Apart from anything else, such abstract arguments cannot establish the existence of the personal god of Abraham. A successful objective argument produces objective knowledge, rather than faith, trust, submission, and similar religious attitudes. There is something irreligious about formal proofs of the existence of God, so we should not suppose that we cut out the core of theism by refuting them.

In short, the scientific argument tells only against the most literal-minded and unsophisticated theists. These are worth defeating because politically they are often the most damaging. However, we do little to advance our own thoughts by scoring easy victories.

2.4 The Historical Case Against Theism

Examination of the religious texts reveals inconsistencies (for an early exhibition of this point, see Spinoza *Theological-Political Treatise*). Application of standard historical method to religious texts offers plausible non-religious explanations of their contents. In treating documents, historians do not assume that scribes simply write down the truth. People write for some purpose, with some specific audience in mind. To interpret a historical document, we have to consider what the author is likely to have known, what assumptions he or she is likely to have made about the readership, and what the point was. The story of doubting Thomas makes sense when we understand that Thomas preached a Christianity in which Christ was an inspired religious teacher but not divine. Similarly, the problem of the trinity makes historical sense when we consider the differing understanding of divinity in Jewish and pagan religious imagination (the task of Paul).

The vital point: religions change over the centuries. Believers must either deny this, or find some explanation of why God did not reveal His truths more accurately in the first place. When we examine religious texts historically, they invariably lose their authority and their universality. This is particularly clear in the case of the Book of Mormon (1830), which is obviously the product of a desire for a version of Christianity that gives a leading role to America. It takes more scholarship to do the same debunking work on older texts, but the effect is the same.

2.5 The Moral Case: Religions fail to meet our moral standards.

Ethical understanding changes over time. Most religions pre-date the emergence of our contemporary values, such as democracy, equality and human rights. Some of their moral teaching seems positively immoral to us, such as the tolerance of slavery in the Old Testament, or Muslim law that counts a woman's testimony as less than a man's. Much of the political language of Christianity is pre-democratic, such as Christ as *Lord* or *King of Kings*. We do not, nowadays, allow kings and lords much of a role beyond the ceremonial, because we are conscious of our value as individuals and our rights as citizens. The emphasis on submission and obedience in some religions offends against this understanding. Religious leaders face a dilemma: either, they maintain the old moral and political language and standards laid down in their religious texts and traditions, or they keep their teaching up to date with the moral development of society. If they stick to their ancient text, then they end up defending cruelty, discrimination or injustice; but if they move

with the ethical times, they have to explain how God seems to change His mind, and somehow avoid giving the impression that they are borrowing from the ethical development of secular society rather than offering an alternative to it. We see this today as the Church of England grapples with homosexuality and women bishops—questions that secular society decided some decades ago.

Some parts of religious teaching make no moral sense to us at all, such as the crucifixion of Christ to atone for the sins of mankind. From our modern moral point of view, it seems that whatever 'sin' means, it cannot mean 'moral misdemeanour', because we have a sense of individual justice. *My* moral misdemeanours are my own, and if anyone else pays for them, even willingly, it is a miscarriage of justice. It is just as if someone went to prison in my place. So the crucifixion seems to leave us with a mystery. However, there is a plausible historical explanation. In the first century, the Jews were suffering yet another foreign occupation. This raised a theological problem: why do the chosen people of God suffer at the hands of pagans? The answer was that the Jews suffer to atone for the sins of the world. They are the cosmic scapegoat. This notion, of an innocent creature who suffers the wrath of an angry tyrant, makes no moral sense to us, though it does make historical sense when we recall the typical institutions of justice at the time. How then can the Messiah relieve the suffering of the Jews? The answer is evident: he must take over the role of cosmic scapegoat. In short, Jesus answered a question that was pressing for religious Jews two thousand years ago, using a moral concept that is incompatible with our modern conception of individual justice. His question does not trouble us, nor do we have a use for the crude ethical framework in which he answered it. One of the traditional theological problems is the problem of suffering: why would an all-powerful, all-knowing and all-loving God allow His innocent creatures to suffer? Theological attempts to answer this question are either morally obnoxious or simply mystifying.

On the other hand, it is not the case that religion causes all the suffering. Stalin, Mao and Robespierre! Finally, there is this philosophical-ethical objection to religion: religion misdirects our ethical sense and blinds us to the value of what is good. Religions claim to offer a moral foundation. Without God, their followers claim, there is nothing of any value in the universe. But this cannot be right—without God, there remain love, laughter, generosity, insight, beauty, and everything else that we know to be valuable. The claim that there is no value in the world without God entails that these things are not really valuable in themselves, that they require an injection of goodness from without. In this sense, it is the religious who are the true nihilists.

Reading: Renan, Joseph Ernest *The Historical Jesus*. (Knight pp. 66-7)

2.6 Further Reading:

Norman, Richard 'Why Science Undermines Religion' (chapter two of *On Humanism*, Routledge, 2004).

Spinoza, Benedict *Theological-Political Treatise*. Trans Michael Siverthorne & Jonathan Israel (ed. Jonathan Israel). Cambridge University Press, 2007 (original publication, 1670).

Voltaire *Philosophical Dictionary*. Trans Theodore Besterman. Penguin, 1972.

Questions on the Reading:

- (e) In what ways might a Christian apologist respond to this argument?
 - (f) Does it follow from the textual evidence mentioned here that Jesus was not an incarnation of God?
 - (g) What follows from Renan's observation that "the strictness of a studied theology" was not possible in "such a state of society"?
 - (h) How can we best account for the emergence of the doctrine of the trinity?
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Discussion questions:

9. To what extent do Humanist beliefs depend on knowledge gained since the publication of *The Origin of Species* (remember Russell's view that the vital moment was Copernicus' displacement of the Earth from the centre of the universe)?
 10. If religion vanished from the world, would there still be any point to being a humanist?
 11. Can we learn anything about our own lives from old books written in very different societies (think of the Norse sagas or the *Iliad*)?
 12. Do we need something like religious institutions to hold society together?
 13. Do we need rituals?
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Week 3: Ethics

3. Synopsis:

3.1 Here is an internet classic that points shows how biblical literalists read the Bible selectively:

Dear Dr. L—,

Thank you for doing so much to educate people regarding God's Law. I have learned a great deal from your show, and I try to share that knowledge with as many people as I can. When someone tries to defend the homosexual lifestyle, for example, I simply remind him that Leviticus 18:22 clearly states it to be an abomination. End of debate.

I do need some advice from you, however, regarding some of the specific laws and how to best follow them.

- a) When I burn a bull on the altar as a sacrifice, I know it creates a pleasing odour for the Lord (Lev. 1:9). The problem is my neighbors. They claim the odour is not pleasing to them. Should I smite them?
- b) I would like to sell my daughter into slavery, as sanctioned in Exodus 21:7. In this day and age, what do you think would be a fair price for her?
- c) I know that I am allowed no contact with a woman while she is in her period of menstrual uncleanness (Lev. 15:19-24). The problem is, how do I tell? I have tried asking, but most women take offense.
- d) Lev. 25:44 states that I may indeed possess slaves, both male and female, provided they are purchased from neighboring nations. A friend of mine claims that this applies to Mexicans, but not Canadians. Can you clarify? Why can't I own Canadians?
- e) I have a neighbor who insists on working on the Sabbath. Exodus 35:2 clearly states he should be put to death. Am I morally obligated to kill him myself?
- f) A friend of mine feels that even though eating shellfish is an abomination (Lev. 11:10), it is a lesser abomination than homosexuality. I don't agree. Can you settle this?
- g) Lev. 21:20 states that I may not approach the altar of God if I have a defect in my sight. I have to admit that I wear reading glasses. Does my vision have to be 20/20, or is there some wiggle room here?
- h) Most of my male friends get their hair trimmed, including the hair around their temples, even though this is expressly forbidden by Lev.19:27. How should they die?
- i) I know from Lev. 11:6-8 that touching the skin of a dead pig makes me unclean, but may I still play football if I wear gloves?
- j) My uncle has a farm. He violates Lev. 19:19 by planting two different crops in the same field, as does his wife by wearing garments made of two different kinds of thread (cotton/polyester blend). He also tends to curse and blaspheme a lot. Is it really necessary that we go to all the

trouble of getting the whole town together to stone them? (Lev.24:10-16) Couldn't we just burn them to death at a private family affair like we do with people who sleep with their in-laws? (Lev.20:14)

I know you have studied these things extensively, so I am confident you can help. Thank you again for reminding us that God's word is eternal and unchanging.

This relies for its comedy on the fact that we (including the biblical literalists) find much of the Old Testament legislation to be morally repugnant. People who appeal to the Bible distinguish between the timeless moral wheat and the historically redundant chaff—but how? In any case, suppose that we had a divinely-ordained law that did not contain anything irrelevant or immoral. Still, we would have to interpret it. Which rule is relevant on any given occasion? And how shall they be applied? See the variety of interpretation of Jewish food laws. In other words, you can't get out of making ethical judgments. The religious person simply has the additional task, having made an ethical judgment, of arguing that God agrees with it.

The 'Euthyphro dilemma': do the gods love the good because it is good, or is the good the good because the gods love it?

Nevertheless, philosophy owes us an account of ethical judgment. It gives us several:

- Consequentialism and utilitarianism: the greatest happiness for the greatest number
- Kantian ethics: you shall not use humanity as a means only
- Virtue ethics: what sort of person are you trying to become?
- Relativism: the worst doctrine of the nicest people

Toulmin's story (Jonsen & Toulmin 1988 pp. 16-19; Toulmin 2001 p. 132) and Bambrough's argument suggest that there is nothing deeper than ethics. A rabbi on *The Moral Maze* kept asking 'What about the Moral Dimension?', as if it were somehow separate from the question 'What shall we do?' In fact, the panel had been talking about ethics all along, without turning it into a separate and problematic 'dimension'.

Reading: Knight, Margaret Kennedy *Religion and Moral Training* (Knight pp. 128-30)

3.2 Further Reading:

Bambrough, Renford "A Proof of the Objectivity of Morals" *The American Journal of Jurisprudence* 14 (1969): 37-53.

Blackburn, Simon *Being Good*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. (Reprinted as *A Very Short Introduction to Ethics*, 2003)

Glover, Jonathan *Causing Death and Saving Lives*. Penguin, 1991.

Jonsen, Albert & Toulmin, Stephen *The Abuse of Casuistry*. University of California Press, 1988.

Stirner, Max *The Ego and Its Own*. Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Toulmin, Stephen *Return to Reason*. Harvard University Press, 2001.

Questions on the Reading:

- (i) Is it true that "Most people are prepared to accept as a completely self-evident moral axiom that we must not be completely selfish"?
 - (j) If most people accept a proposition, does that increase its credibility?
 - (k) Are the two stereotypes (the 'atheist' and the 'unbeliever') still current?
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Discussion questions:

14. Does ethics need a basis?
 15. What sort of evidence is relevant to arguments about ethics?
 16. Can we resolve ethical disagreements by rational discussion?
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Week 4: Liberalism

4. Synopsis:

The fundamental liberal aim is to protect the individual against the power of the state, including the paternalist state. Liberalism tends to think that people are the best judges of their own interests—this connects with economic liberalism (let people spend their own money). Most people in the UK are liberals to some degree, in that we do not want the government to run every aspect of our lives. We expect the state to respect our rights, we expect to be treated equally by the law and to have the right to vote.

4.1 Philosophical Spokesmen: John Locke and John Stuart Mill

Locke treats the body and its labour as property. The government is there to protect already existing property-relations (already existing, that is, in the state of nature, before the government is formed). Connection to Humanism: paternalism often comes from a religious source. Take for instance the debate about assisted suicide for people with terminal illnesses. The religious view is that our lives are not our own, that we do not have the right to dispose of them, and that their value does not lie solely in our pleasure. The humanist counterarguments are usually two:

- Who could be a greater authority on the value of my life than me? (Anti-paternalism)
- My life and my body are my own (Lockean self-ownership)

4.2 Difficulties for liberalism:

The liberal model of the individual is abstract. This is part of its point, in that we are equal before the law regardless of our gender, race, caste, social standing, *etc.* However, in some instances justice may require attention to specifics that the liberal model ignores.

Moreover, liberalism fails to see that the individual is a rational, property-owning individual only as a result of belonging to a society, and arguably may owe something to society. To put the same point differently: man in the state of nature, as imagined by social-contract theory, is really the condition of colonists in Virginia. That is to say, people raised in and formed by government-regulated civilisation, now living in an ungoverned and limitless wilderness.

Liberalism claims to be neutral between conceptions of the good, but is not really, because the public/private distinction is part of a substantial view about value. This comes out in conflict with religious traditions in which religion is necessarily public, which cannot conceive of a section of life devoid of religious colour. In fact, few people and no societies are wholly or exclusively liberal. All governments rule out some conceptions of the good life (such as de Sade's). All governments have some paternalistic laws (requiring car seat-belts, for example). Moreover, it is hard to see how children could be brought up in a way that did not incline them in any particular ethical or philosophical direction. Their parents' mode of life must influence them, either as a model or as a warning.

There is a particular problem for campaigning humanists: much of the time, in our campaigning, it is the liberalism that does the work. E.g. if we are opposed to sexism, we should oppose it everywhere, not just in religious contexts. We cannot claim that all sexism arises from religious sources, and not all religions and

religious people are sexist. This point comes out when we try to blame religion for war and persecution. Religious apologists point, correctly, to Stalin and Mao as examples of atheists who were responsible for persecutions (and incorrectly, to Hitler, who was a Christian, outlawed atheism and asserted that he was doing the work of Almighty God).

The evil root of the crusades, the Spanish inquisition, the Nazis, Stalinism and so on is totalitarianism—whether it be religious or not. Here again, if we oppose totalitarianism, it is because we are liberals, not because we are atheists. However, there is a point that humanists can make against some religions traditions. Religions of one god, one truth and one book especially vulnerable to totalitarianism, the more so if they count obedience as a virtue.

Reading: Norman, Richard (ed.) *The Case for Secularism: a neutral state in an open society*. British Humanist Association, 2007.

4.3 Further Reading:

Cave, Peter 'With Politics' (chapter five of *Humanism*, Oneworld Publications, 2009).

Haworth, Alan *Understanding the Political Philosophers: From Ancient to Modern Times*. Routledge, 2003.

Kant, Immanuel *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. 1785

Locke, John *Second Treatise on Civil Government*. 1690.

Mill, John Stuart *On Liberty*. 1859.

Mill, John Stuart *Utilitarianism*. 1863.

Spinoza, Benedict *Theological-Political Treatise*. Trans Michael Siverthorne & Jonathan Israel (ed. Jonathan Israel). Cambridge University Press, 2007 (original publication, 1670).

Questions on the Reading:

- (l) Does this text consider all of the serious arguments against secularism?
- (m) The text seems to assume that a well-functioning, inclusive society must be possible. Does it? If so, does it matter?
- (n) What, if anything, can humanists say to those who think that a society of diverse faiths and beliefs is neither possible nor desirable?

Discussion questions:

- 17. Should we have complete liberty of expression (remember that holocaust denial is illegal in Germany)?
 - 18. Must humanists be liberals?
 - 19. Does the liberalism of liberal Humanism supply *all* the logical grounds for humanist campaigns?
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Week 5: Human Rights and Tolerance

5. Synopsis:

5.1 Human Rights

Historically, people held rights in virtue of status or office. You might hold certain rights as a citizen of a particular state or burgher of a particular town. These could be the sorts of rights we now recognise as fundamental (such as the right to vote or the right to trial by jury), or they might be more like by-laws (such as the right to collect firewood or graze your animals on certain land). The idea of rights that belong to all humans simply in virtue of being human is a development of relatively recent centuries. It raises new problems, because a right held in virtue of a particular status or office includes reference to the state or institution required to defend and enforce the right. If I am a citizen of Athens, then I can expect the Athenian state to guarantee my rights of citizenship. Moreover, there is a natural reciprocity of rights and duties in these local rights. The state guarantees the rights of those citizens who perform their civic duties (such as military service and political participation). Rights held simply in virtue of being human seem to lack these features. The whole concept of international law is relatively undeveloped and conflicts with the sovereignty of nations.

In addition, universal human rights raise a particular problem for humanists. This is evident in one of the most famous formulations:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

—United States Declaration of Independence, 1776

Obviously, humanists cannot make the case for universal human rights by appealing to the equality of all before God or the dignity of creatures made in their maker's image. Appeals to universal human nature run into the difficulty of arguing an ought from an is, and in any case, many of the rights refer to institutions such as national law, which seem to go beyond what follows from membership of the human species. There were, after all, humans long before there were nations and laws.

This difficulty becomes concrete in the face of criticisms of the UDHR from some Muslims and libertarians. The Muslim critics complain that the UDHR is a secularised version of Judeo-Christian ethics, and is incompatible on various points with Islam. Libertarians have a general objection to rights that transfer resources (because they think that transfers of resources, such as welfare benefits, are effective theft). Articles twenty-two and twenty-five seem to guarantee welfare payments. Some libertarians also oppose the reference to compulsory schooling in article twenty-six.

The rights set out in the thirty articles can seem to be too culturally and historically specific to count as natural rights though we should remember they were written by writers from many cultures. However, there are philosophical options. We do not have to claim that rights are natural to human beings like limbs, singing and lust. We can hold instead that rights are institutional instruments created to protect goods that we have identified through prior ethical argument.

5.2 Tolerance

Humanists argue for freedom of expression and tolerance of lifestyles and conceptions of the good that do not hurt others. This is logically separate from the other elements of Humanism—many theists affirm freedom and tolerance. Moreover, there have been and are totalitarian and intolerant atheists. However, atheism tends to favour tolerance, because it is hard to see how one person can gain the legitimate authority to interfere in another's life, if there is no god to grant such authority.

One radical expression of liberal tolerance is Mill's 'harm principle', which says that the government may interfere with one person's liberty *only* to prevent harm to another. On this view, people may legally damage themselves with hard drugs, damaging sports or other forms of recreational self-harm. This applies to rational adults—but self-harm may be grounds for doubting a person's rationality (membership of a suicide cult, for example). In fact, most governments do have some paternalistic laws, and most people have some paternalistic instincts. These may arise from a proper moral concern for another—it would be callous not to feel any concern at the sight of people harming themselves. However, it does not follow that interference is morally acceptable.

Humanists have a particular interest in freedom of expression. The classic argument for freedom of expression is in the second section of John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*. There, Mill rests his argument against censorship on two plausible premises. The first is that humans are fallible. That is, we are always capable of getting things wrong and we can never be entirely sure that we have anything right. Mill's second premise is that we are corrigible. Experience and critical discussion can improve our opinions. Being fallible, we can never be sure that any particular change of mind takes us closer to the truth. But the only way to correct such mistakes is more experience and critical discussion. Our best hope of improving our opinions is to make them public, so that others may show us our errors. (Mill is not the only person to make the case for fallibilism: see also Oliver Cromwell and Karl Popper.)

Mill argues that censorship prevents us from correcting errors by critical discussion. If a forbidden opinion is true, we lose the opportunity to learn of its truth. If a forbidden opinion is false, we lose the opportunity to remind ourselves why it is false. Truths become stale for lack of opposition. In the early days of a religion (or any other movement), its teaching is vivid and urgent because the believers must defend it against the established powers and doctrines of the day. However, if the new religion joins the ranks of established powers and doctrines, it becomes something learned by rote and practised mechanically. Therefore, defenders of orthodoxies should welcome opposition, to keep their own creeds fresh and active. Mill anticipates some objections by arguing that to claim to know that a belief is useful or essential for public order without allowing it to be tested, is in effect to claim to know, infallibly, that it is true.

Nowadays, the most widely-heard argument for censorship is that words can hurt. People can be wounded by mockery of that which they hold to be sacred. Michael Dummett makes the point with an analogy: suppose that the only memento you had of your parents was a set of photographs. Suppose that someone scribbled on them, adding lewd or scatological details. The harm would be real, even though you were not physically injured, and would persist even if you managed to clean off the damage. Blasphemy (goes Dummett's argument) inflicts the same sort of hurt.

Religious proponents of censorship usually say that they welcome reasonable criticism. What they object to, and would like the law to prevent, is offensive or abusive mockery of their faith. Mill argues against legal protection from offensive criticism. He observes that any vigorous and effective criticism, when passionately put, will seem intemperate to its target. It is painful to have the logical deficiencies of one's most cherished convictions publicly exposed. We cannot outlaw criticism merely because it hurts. (Notice: Mill's 'harm principle' says that the government may interfere with one person's liberty *only* to prevent harm to another. It does *not* say that the government must always intervene to prevent one from harming another.) And in fact, all criticism is to some degree offensive. To make a criticism is to make an accusation. Even the most temperate criticism involves accusing someone of overlooking something important, getting some fact wrong or making a logical mistake. Therefore, to ban every criticism that includes some element of invective opens the way for a ban on all criticism. For this reason, Mill held that a law that tried to distinguish between temperate criticism and offensive abuse would be arbitrary, and that judges would exploit this arbitrariness in the service of the powerful.

Notice that Mill argues for the freedom to express *opinions*. His case depends on the fact that opinions may be true or false. What about art? Works of art do not normally have clear messages that we can treat as

statements and examine like opinions. Nevertheless, those works of art that have attracted violent attempts at suppression in recent years do seem to have had something to say. *The Satanic Verses* is (amongst other things) a meditation on geographical displacement and cultural hybridisation; *Behzti* is about power relations in the Sikh community; Theo van Gogh's film *Submission* makes a similar point about Islam; the Danish cartoon that caused the most fuss was the one that suggested a connection between Islam and suicide terrorism; *Jerry Springer the Opera* seems to argue for the contemporary relevance of Biblical stories. These works are part of the discussion about religion, and consequently deserve the protection of Mill's argument, even though they do not have unambiguous messages and are not true in the manner of a factual statement or false in the manner of a lie.

There may be critical points that require artistic or literary expression. By the end of *Candide's* adventures, all the ingenious theological manoeuvres to explain how God could permit suffering look ridiculous. Voltaire could not have achieved this effect by dry argument. Nietzsche's Zarathustra enjoys a 'last supper' with his followers during which he explains the sickness of Christian values. Monty Python's *Life of Brian* addresses the moral arrogance of Christianity by re-writing the story of its origins. *Satanic Verses* performs a similar service for Islam. These insights are clearer in drama than in prose. Indeed, some theologians argue that spiritual matters require analogical or metaphorical expression. In that case, analogy and metaphor should be available to everyone.

The price to pay for the freedom of expression is that some of our talk may be hurtful. However, this point applies to everyone. Many atheists and agnostics have convictions as deep as any religious faith, and are therefore vulnerable to harmful ridicule. We should not try to prevent such attacks by law, for two reasons. First, out of fairness the law would have to be so comprehensive as to be stifling. It would have to protect each person's holy of holies. Second, critical debate is an essential part of freedom, even when that debate offends against someone's conception of the sacred. The best we can do is to conduct these debates in such a way that the harm they cause is neither gratuitous nor vindictive.

Reading: Voltaire *Toleration* (Knight pp. 25-27)

5.3 Further Reading:

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (appendix)

Humanist Philosophers' Group *For Your Own Good: Paternalism Re-examined*. British Humanist Association, 2001.

Locke, John *Letter on Toleration* (1689)

Mill, John Stuart *On Liberty*. 1859.

Nietzsche, Friedrich *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (written 1883 – 1885)

Voltaire *Candide* (1759)

Questions on the Reading:

- (o) What exactly is Voltaire's conclusion?
- (p) What exactly is Voltaire's argument?
- (q) Voltaire's argument seems to work by finding a contradiction between the doctrine of the inquisitor and the behaviour of worldly diplomats. Is that a fair summary? If so, it is a good argument?

Discussion questions:

- 20. How can humanists make the case for universal human rights without appeal to religious ideas?
 - 21. Is there anything we should not tolerate?
 - 22. Should there be any paternalistic laws?
 - 23. Should the liberal state tolerate bodies that seek to overthrow it?
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Week 6: Religion and Faith

6. Synopsis:

Atheists tend to claim reason as their own (this goes back to the Enlightenment). The National Secular Society was first called the Society of Reasoners, and we still have the Rationalist Association. In fact, atheists may not be the most skilled or advanced at rational criticism of religion. As Jim Herrick says, “biblical criticism and the dismantling of dogma is now done by the theologians themselves”¹. Sophisticated contemporary theologians know all about the inconsistencies in the scriptures, the schisms of the early Church, the apocryphal gospels of Mary, Thomas, and the rest. They smile indulgently on aggressive atheists who imagine they can eradicate Christianity by brandishing facts known to all educated clergy for the best part of two centuries.

Such theologians reconcile this knowledge with continued religious practice by a variety of means. One is to argue that religion is a kind of poetry that expresses truths that are ineffable in literal speech. For example, theologians influenced by the German idealism of the early nineteenth century talk of ‘wholeness’. The universe (they say) is not a mass of discrete objects or separate atoms; rather it has an intimate unity akin to that of a living body, and we are part of it. Our lives, too, are integrated in themselves. We are poets even in our most menial functions and family to all even in our loneliest hours. Literal language cannot properly express such wholeness, because it takes the world to be already divided into things and their properties, to which nouns and adjectives correspond. Only a kind of especially deep poetry—in other words, religion—can express such truths. From this perspective, picking away at historical and scientific facts seems rather like this letter that Charles Babbage wrote to the poet Tennyson:

Sir: In your otherwise beautiful poem ‘The Vision of Sin’ there is a verse which reads – ‘Every moment dies a man, Every moment one is born’. It must be manifest that if this were true, the population of the world would be at a standstill... I would suggest that in the next edition of your poem you have it read – ‘Every moment dies a man, Every moment 1□ is born’... The actual figure is so long I cannot get it onto a line, but I believe the figure 1□ will be sufficiently accurate for poetry.²

For up-to-date theology, to treat a phrase such as ‘God is Love’ as a proposition requiring logical and/or empirical investigation is to miss its point, just as Babbage missed the point, not merely of Tennyson’s poem but of poetry.

Faced with theology of this sort, humanists have a choice. We can declare that there is no truth in poetry (or art generally) that cannot be expressed just as accurately in literal prose. Anything true, we might insist, can be said plainly. This option suffers from some technical difficulties—how can one know that *all* truths can be expressed literally? It also tends to reinforce the reputation atheists have for lacking sensitivity and depth, and for mistaking art for entertainment. Or, we can allow the thought that poetry (and other arts) can express otherwise ineffable truths. We may then ask the theologians how reasonable persons of goodwill can judge which poems express the deeper truths. Why should we suppose that Christianity-as-poetry is deeper and truer than the *Iliad*, or *The Waste Land*? And, why should some kinds of poetry enjoy such social and political prestige that its votaries enjoy special moral authority? This second option allows us to show that we humanists also seek truth in art. However, briskly scientific-minded atheists may feel that here, we run the risk of leaping, sword drawn, into the swamp in which the theologians are already stuck. Rather than explore these two options further, I want to make a point about the limits of reason.

¹ Jim Herrick *Humanism: An Introduction*. Rationalist Press Association, 2009 (second edition). p. 126

² Doron Swade *The Difference Engine: Charles Babbage and the quest to build the first computer* (London: Viking, 2000) p. 77.

David Hume (1711-1776) argued that we have no non-circular reason to expect the future to resemble the past, to think that there is a world of real objects that cause our sensations or that we exist for extended periods (rather than merely having the impression that we remember our pasts). In other words, rationalism does not ground itself. We cannot be sure that rational enquiry takes us closer to the truth. There are many philosophical attempts to solve this problem, but they all leave some question begging. The wise position is that of Mill, who observed that, fallible and ungrounded though it may be, rational enquiry remains our best bet.

Suppose, for the sake of argument, that Hume's challenge can be met in the case of empirical knowledge. There may be a rational justification for trusting natural science, because it is self-correcting, in ways that other forms of knowledge are not. Certainly, natural science is credible because it does not respond to our wishes and does not allow us to see the world in terms that we easily understand. That still leaves humanists with a problem of justification, because the positive part of Humanism—the denial of nihilism—does not seem to be the kind of thing you can prove.

In any case, all our knowledge is second-hand. We all, including professional scientists, depend on authorities for almost all of our knowledge. We trust doctors and car-mechanics with our lives, without checking their credentials or getting to know their characters. Of course, some authorities are more authoritative than others, but there is some element of trust involved in almost all our sources of knowledge. Moreover, trust is at the core of our relationships. We do not wait for our spouses to provide evidence of fidelity before trusting them, only trusting them to the degree warranted by the evidence. Trust has to come long before any evidence of trustworthiness, otherwise no intimate relationship would be possible. As William James said in his 1897 lecture 'The Will to Believe', "a man who in the company of gentlemen ... believed no one's word without proof would cut himself off by such churlishness from all the social rewards that a more trusting spirit would earn". That is why infidelity is so damaging: it is a betrayal rather than a failure to calculate probabilities.

Does trust of this sort amount to faith, in anything like the religious sense? To answer that, we need some understanding of what faith is. One thing that religious believers seem to agree is that religious faith is not simply a matter of believing some proposition in the absence of adequate justification. According to the theologian Richard Niebuhr, when a nationalist says,

"I was born to die for my country" he is exhibiting the double relationship that we now call faith. The national life is for him the reality whence his own life derives its worth. He relies on the nation as source of his own value. He trusts it; first, perhaps, in the sense of looking constantly to it as the enduring reality out of which he has issued, into whose ongoing cultural life his own actions and being will merge. His life has meaning because it is part of that context, like a word in a sentence. It has value because it fits into a valuable whole. His trust may also be directed toward the nation as a power which will supply his needs, care for his children, and protect his life. But faith in the nation is primarily reliance upon it as an enduring value-center. Insofar as the nation is the last value-center to which the nationalist refers, he does not raise the question about its goodness to him or about its rightness or wrongness... This does not mean in any Hobbesian sense that for such faith the national government determines what is right and what is wrong but rather that the rightness of all actions depends on their consonance with the inner constitution of the nation and on their tendency to enhance or diminish national life, power, and glory.³

Religious faith, then, is something like this only with the nation replaced by God. Whether Humanism involves faith in this sense depends on which humanist you choose to look at. Insofar as Humanism is a practical attitude rather than an abstract doctrine, it may have something in common with faith in Niebuhr's

³ Niebuhr, H. Richard, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*. New York: Harper and Row, 1943, 152, 1955, 1960 (A Harper Torch-book). P. 17.

sense. (On the other hand, few humanists would sink their lives into just one source of meaning. Both the nationalist and the theist look one-dimensional on this picture.)

What then of the relation between faith and reason? We have to trust other people—but not blindly. If someone is manifestly untrustworthy, it is not churlish to be wary of that person. Similarly, if a tradition misrepresents its history, makes excuses for unethical behaviour or practices double-think, we have reason to be wary of it. When reading sophisticated theology that treats the contents of scripture as poetry or analogy, one should always ask how much of this the clergy explain to their regular church-goers. Finally, faith-in, that is, faith in the sense of trust requires something or someone in which to lodge that trust. Humanists may have a faith in humans and the potential of human reason and virtue that exceeds what can be empirically justified. But we have good empirical grounds for thinking that humans exist.

Reading: Cave, Peter *Humanism*. Oxford: Oneworld, 2009, pp.52-64.

6.1 Further Reading:

Clifford, William K. 'The Ethics of Belief' 1877.

Hume, David *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* 1748

James, William 'The Will to Believe' 1897

James, William *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Penguin, 1982 (first edition 1902).

Questions on the Reading:

- (r) Does Cave's remark that "Odd pictures of the world help us to handle the world" concede too much to religion?
- (s) If religion is no more than an odd picture of the world, drawn to help us handle it, is there any point to being a campaigning atheist?
- (t) Should we, could we, judge such odd pictures for their accuracy?
- (u) Will any odd picture do, if it helps people to cope?

Discussion questions:

- 24. Is there truth in poetry or art that we cannot express fully in literal prose?
 - 25. Is trust different from faith?
 - 26. Does all meaningful human life involve acts (or leaps) of faith?
 - 27. Are some faiths more reasonable than others?
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Week 7: Nihilism, Naturalism and Nietzsche

7. Synopsis:

Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) thought that life is pointless. We are hounded by our desires, and when we do satisfy them, we become bored, until more desires arise, bringing with them new dissatisfaction. Overall,

The ceaseless efforts to banish suffering achieve nothing more than a change in its form. This is essentially want, lack, care for the maintenance of life. If, which is very difficult, we have succeeded in removing pain in this form, it at once appears on the scene in a thousand others, varying according to age and circumstances, such as sexual impulse, passionate love, jealousy, envy, hatred, anxiety, ambition, avarice, sickness, and so on. Finally, if it cannot find entry in any other shape, it comes in the sad, grey garment of weariness, satiety, and boredom, against

which many different attempts are made. Even if we ultimately succeed in driving these away, it will hardly be done without letting pain in once again in one of the previous forms, and thus starting the dance once more at the beginning; for every human life is tossed backwards and forwards between pain and boredom.⁴

Schopenhauer was one of the first philosophers to think of humans as one animal among the others. Previous philosophers treated man as a special case, distinguished by rationality and (in some writers) an immortal soul. For Schopenhauer, humans are different from other animals only in that we are capable of more varied and more subtle suffering and cruelty. The underlying reality is the blind and hungry will. Nietzsche took from Schopenhauer the question: what kind of animal is man? Anticipating Freud, Nietzsche argued that everything we do, including noble and objective enterprises like art and science, is part of an attempt to satisfy needs to which we are mostly oblivious. However, faced with the teeming, biting, scratching, red-in-tooth-and-claw surge of life, including the back-biting scholar writing a poisonous review of a colleague's book, Nietzsche did not counsel despair. Nor did he recommend, as Schopenhauer did, that we minimise our passion like Buddhist sages.

Rather, Nietzsche wanted to affirm life. His objection to Christianity was that it saps the vitality of civilisations that it takes over. Better by far the cheerful, healthy vigour of pre-Christian Greeks and unconverted German barbarians, free as they were from sexual inhibition, milky compassion and a distracting pre-occupation with the hereafter. (This was not wholly original; Gibbon's account of the decline of the Roman Empire blamed the enervating effects of Christianity.)

If Nietzsche is a yea-sayer, why does he have a reputation for nihilism?

1. Because he says that our whole understanding of value is through-and-through Judeo-Christian. As we have killed the Judeo-Christian god, we will have to create new values by force of will. To some people this seems either impossible, or a fancy kind of might-makes-right. After all, values created through an act of will are not objective; they are merely expressions of desire. If we think that values must have some ground outside human life, then Nietzsche seems like a nihilist.

2. Because he was a diagnostic psychologist—he seems to offer explanations of philosophical, scientific and religious activities and doctrines in terms of unconscious drives.

This returns us to humanism in the first sense canvassed in the first session. That is, humanism as the study of the humanities disciplines of history, language and literature. Some philosophers (e.g. R.G. Collingwood) believe that these disciplines cannot become part of the sciences, because they study meaningful human action, and this is an irreducible category. However, in Nietzsche and Freud, what seem like meaningful acts chosen by rational agents are revealed as symptoms of urges that their suffers rarely and barely recognise. The unified rational agent is a mask for a mass of impersonal forces.

The integrity of rational agency nowadays suffers other threats, in addition to the arguments of Nietzsche and Freud. Many philosophers now think that since everything somehow depends on matter, then all knowledge must ultimately find its ground in physics. The relationship between mind and brain is intimate—perhaps so intimate that the study of the mind and its works is, ultimately, study of the brain. In that case, the humanities disciplines must eventually become part of natural science. Daniel Dennett, for example, thinks this. His example shows that you can be a humanist in the usual sense without being a humanist in this scholarly sense of insisting on the independence of the humanities disciplines from natural science. Moreover, you can be a humanist in the scholarly sense while retaining religious belief. Indeed, you might think (as Dennett seems to) this kind of humanism requires a religious belief.

⁴ Schopenhauer A. (1966) *The World as Will and Representation*, two volumes, trans. E. F. J. Payne (London: Dover Publications) p. 315.

On the other hand, one might defend the fundamental status of the humanities disciplines by pointing out that the practice of science itself depends on the possibility of minds meeting as minds. That is to say, scientists must be able to read each other's arguments *as arguments*, for science to work at all, and this depends on the intelligibility of treating meaningful, reasoned human action as such. Given two consecutive sentences in a book, we read each in the context of the other. We do this because a single mind composed them as part of a single communicative act. If we abandon (or reduce to physics) the category of the individual agent acting for intelligible reasons, then we cannot understand how it is possible to understand each other.

This then is a division within philosophy, and it relates to last week's discussion about how to respond to the suggestion that religion is a special kind of poetry. Some insist that all knowledge must be part of the natural scientific enterprise. On this view, anything that somehow escaped scientific scrutiny and explanation would have to be supernatural. Others argue that human agency cannot be reduced to natural scientific categories without rendering the practice of science unintelligible. Besides, if the human agent acting for intelligible reasons disappears from our picture of the world, then what is the point of the liberal institutions and doctrine erected to protect such agents from the over-mighty state?

Is natural science the whole story, or is there more to say? If there is more to say, how can art, literature, history (or theology) say what natural science cannot? This question is crucial for humanists. On one hand, we look to science to support our atheism. On the other hand, the things we care about (the lives and loves of individual humans) do not appear in the natural scientific description of the world. At least, they do not appear in the forms in which we care for them. For example, physics can register perturbations in air pressure, but it cannot distinguish the tuning up and the sound-check from the musical performance. Physics certainly cannot distinguish the great performance from the mediocre. People are sometimes wary of atheism because they suspect, with Hamlet, that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in natural philosophy (as natural science was called in Shakespeare's day). One of the challenges for humanists is to explain that there is more in life than natural science can register, without invoking anything supernatural.

In meeting that challenge, we will draw on our common culture, including the better parts of the religious traditions within it. However, we will not have fallen into theology, because in drawing on the products of human thought and experience such as the works of poets, dramatists, novelists and historians and the stories included in the religions, we will not pretend that these stories are anything other than what they are, tales told by humans to humans. This licences a joke:

Jesus said to a theologian, "Who do you say that I am?"

The theologian replied, "You are the eschatological manifestation of the ground of our being, the kerygma of which we find the ultimate meaning in our interpersonal relationships."

And Jesus said, "What?"

Reading: Medawar, Peter *Views of a Rationalist Scientist*. (Knight pp. 133-4)

7.1 Further Reading:

Collingwood, R.G. *The Idea of Nature*. Oxford: OUP, 1945. Especially the final four pages.

Dennett, Daniel *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*. Penguin, 2007.

Nietzsche, Friedrich *On the Genealogy of Morality*. 1887.

Schopenhauer Arthur *The World as Will and Representation*. 1818.

Questions on the Reading:

- (v) What does Medawar mean by 'rationalist'?
- (w) How, and how well, does he explain the fact that a rationalist is "something of a period piece"?
- (x) Is it true that 'ordinary people' are satisfied to abandon ultimate questions in favour of gardening? Should they?

Discussion questions:

- 28. To what extent are we in charge of our own lives?
 - 29. Is Schopenhauer's pessimism the sort of thing one can disprove? If not, is there any rational treatment for it?
 - 30. Are our values an expression of will? Would it undermine their status as values if they are expressions of will?
 - 31. Does it matter if science, scholarship and philosophy are driven by asceticism and petty jealousies?
 - 32. Is individual deliberative action irreducible? Or are we the helpless puppets of forces within and without?
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Week 8: Meaning, Ritual and Ceremony

8. Synopsis:

We saw last week that Schopenhauer's atheism drove him to a bleak view of life. Life is suffering, and what is more, the suffering is meaningless. Anything that we might achieve will be destroyed eventually. We are like Ozymandias in Shelley's sonnet of 1818:

I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them on the sand,
Half sunk, a shatter'd visage lies, whose frown
And wrinkled lip and sneer of cold command
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamp'd on these lifeless things,
The hand that mock'd them and the heart that fed.
And on the pedestal these words appear:
"My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"
Nothing beside remains: round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

If we look at our lives 'under the aspect of eternity', then they do seem pointless. The idea that we need supernatural help to inject meaning into our lives depends on this sense of the pointlessness of our brief existences set against the vastness of cosmic time and space. As I mentioned earlier, the picture of God giving meaning to otherwise meaningless lives is a kind of nihilism, because it starts from a conviction that the lives are in themselves meaningless.

It is hard to see how God can rescue us from such nihilism. For suppose that we have some place in a divine plan. First, it had better be a place of some importance. We would not feel our existences to be vindicated if our role was to provide food or entertainment for some higher species. But in any case, we can always ask what is the point of the divine plan? The God we meet in the Abrahamic faiths is a singularly unreflective

individual. He never wonders, as we do, what is the point of His existence. But if our lives depend for their value on our roles in His divine plan, then the plan itself had better be worthwhile.

A better answer to the Ozymandias question is to reject the premise. Why should we view our lives under the aspect of eternity? We have a good view of our lives from inside; from here, we can see values and purposes that are invisible to the eye of eternity. As Thomas Nagel argues in 'The Absurd', if what happens now will be meaningless in the distant future, then equally the distant future is meaningless to us now. In particular, it is, now, meaningless that in the distant future, the present will be meaningless.

Nietzsche and Sartre both emphasise the freedom and responsibility we have for creating meaning and purpose in our lives. "Man", says Sartre, "is nothing but what he makes of himself."⁵ More technically, for humans, existence precedes essence (where 'essence' means something like 'purpose'). However, these aphorisms make it sound as if each individual person has to create a meaningful existence out of nothing, which would be impossible, even for the strongest poet.⁶ In fact, we grow up to inherit the cultural riches of previous generations. A life of art or scholarship is possible because there are artistic and academic traditions already in place. Similarly with politics—it is already there, the individual does not have to invent it from nothing. The error of individualism is especially obvious when we consider the importance of family life. Here again, one does not have to create this from nothing. Most people are born into and raised in a family. More generally, most people are born into a world with value and virtue already present and active in it, thanks to the work of countless earlier generations. It is up to us, collectively, to decide what to make of this inheritance (in this sense, Sartre is right). Nietzsche and Sartre are correct to remind us that we have no escape from this responsibility.

In order for us to find meaning in our relationships with those close to us and in the common life of our communities, we need ways to recognise those connections. We are social animals; we need to know that we are loved, that our values are shared and that our efforts are valued. If our lives are going well, we can gain recognition and affirmation in small ways every day. But the major events in life require more than this. That is why we value ceremonies. Humanist celebrants help to mark births, marriages and deaths. The appetite for ceremony shows itself on occasions such as degree ceremonies and parties to celebrate entry into adulthood and retirement from work. It is notable that no-one notices the absence of religion from these ceremonies.

Ceremony is different from ritual, in that ceremonies are typically rare or unique. Part of the point of ritual is regular and frequent repetition. This can serve a function, especially in educating children. If greetings are rituals, then they certainly do important work, especially if we consider the different kinds of greetings we use for different people. However, we should be clear about the difference between creating a social order through rituals, and deluding ourselves that we are part of a cosmic order.

Reading: Smith, Adam *The Death of Hume* (Knight pp. 37-8)

8.1 Further Reading:

Klemke, E.D. & Cahn, Steven M. (eds) *The Meaning of Life: a reader*. OUP, 2008 (3rd edition).

Nagel, Thomas, 'The Absurd' *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. LXIII, no. 20, 1971, pp. 716-27. Reprinted in Klemke and Cahn.

Sartre, Jean-Paul *Existentialism and Humanism*, trans. P. Mairet. London: Methuen, 1948. (First published 1946).

⁵ *Existentialism and Humanism*

⁶ In fact, Nietzsche thought that ethics is part of culture, and Sartre was a kind of Marxist, so they were not as individualistic as some isolated quotations can make them appear.

Questions on the Reading:

- (y) Do you believe Smith's report of Hume's cheerfulness in the face of death?
- (z) Was Hume's attitude due to his philosophy or his character?

Discussion questions:

- 33. Is there any insight to be gained by looking at life under the aspect of eternity?
 - 34. How bound are we by the traditions we inherit?
 - 35. Do we need ritual, or do we just like it?
 - 36. Are humanist ceremonies to mark births, marriages and deaths merely pale copies of religious ceremonies?
 - 37. Can a ceremony do its work properly if it has just been invented or re-designed?
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9. Reading

The literature on Humanism is large; the literature on life, religion, science, history and the point of it all is unsurveyably vast. I list here some classics, some very readable recent books and some useful collections of excerpts ancient and modern. The classic texts are available in many editions—it's a good idea to pick a recent edition intended for use in universities.

The internet is rich with relevant material; I would urge particular attention to the website of the British Humanist Association: www.humanism.org.uk

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- Humanist Philosophers' Group *For Your Own Good: Paternalism Re-examined*. British Humanist Association, 2001.
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Appendix 1: Definitions of Humanism

International Humanist and Ethical Union Minimum Statement on Humanism (1996)

Any organisation wishing to become a member of IHEU is now obliged to signify its acceptance of this statement:

“Humanism is a democratic and ethical life stance, which affirms that human beings have the right and responsibility to give meaning and shape to their own lives. It stands for the building of a more humane society through an ethic based on human and other natural values in the spirit of reason and free inquiry through human capabilities. It is not theistic, and it does not accept supernatural views of reality.”⁷

The Amsterdam Declaration

As agreed by the International Humanist and Ethical Union at its 50th anniversary conference in 2002.⁸

1. **Humanism is ethical.** It affirms the worth, dignity and autonomy of the individual and the right of every human being to the greatest possible freedom compatible with the rights of others. Humanists have a duty of care to all of humanity including future generations. Humanists believe that morality is an intrinsic part of human nature based on understanding and a concern for others, needing no external sanction.
2. **Humanism is rational.** It seeks to use science creatively, not destructively. Humanists believe that the solutions to the world's problems lie in human thought and action rather than divine intervention. Humanism advocates the application of the methods of science and free inquiry to the problems of human welfare. But Humanists also believe that the application of science and technology must be tempered by human values. Science gives us the means but human values must propose the ends.
3. **Humanism supports democracy and human rights.** Humanism aims at the fullest possible development of every human being. It holds that democracy and human development are matters of right. The principles of democracy and human rights can be applied to many human relationships and are not restricted to methods of government.
4. **Humanism insists that personal liberty must be combined with social responsibility.** Humanism ventures to build a world on the idea of the free person responsible to society, and recognises our dependence on and responsibility for the natural world. Humanism is undogmatic, imposing no creed upon its adherents. It is thus committed to education free from indoctrination.
5. **Humanism is a response to the widespread demand for an alternative to dogmatic religion.** The world's major religions claim to be based on revelations fixed for all time, and many seek to impose their world-views on all of humanity. Humanism recognises that reliable knowledge of the world and ourselves arises through a continuing process of observation, evaluation and revision.
6. **Humanism values artistic creativity and imagination** and recognises the transforming power of art. Humanism affirms the importance of literature, music, and the visual and performing arts for personal development and fulfilment.
7. **Humanism is a lifestance aiming at the maximum possible fulfilment through the cultivation of ethical and creative living** and offers an ethical and rational means of addressing the challenges of our times. Humanism can be a way of life for everyone everywhere.

⁷ <http://www.iheu.org/minimumstatement>

⁸ <http://www.iheu.org/amsterdamdeclaration>

Appendix 2: Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Preamble

Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world,

Whereas disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people,

Whereas it is essential, if man is not to be compelled to have recourse, as a last resort to rebellion against tyranny and oppression that human rights should be protected by the rule of law,

Whereas it is essential to promote the development of friendly relations between nations,

Whereas the peoples of the United Nations have in the Charter reaffirmed their faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person and in the equal rights of men and women and have determined to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom,

Whereas Member States have pledged themselves to achieve, in cooperation with the United Nations, the promotion of universal respect for and observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms,

Whereas a common understanding of these rights and freedoms is of the greatest importance for the full realization of this pledge.

Now, therefore,

The General Assembly

Proclaims this Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance, both among the peoples of Member States themselves and among the peoples of territories under their jurisdiction.

Article 1:

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

Article 2:

Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty.

Article 3:

Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.

Article 4:

No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.

Article 5:

No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

Article 6:

Everyone has the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law.

Article 7:

All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law. All are entitled to equal protection against any discrimination in violation of this Declaration and against any incitement to such discrimination.

Article 8:

Everyone has the right to an effective remedy by the competent national tribunals for acts violating the fundamental rights granted him by the constitution or by law.

Article 9:

No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile.

Article 10:

Everyone is entitled in full equality to a fair and public hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal, in the determination of his rights and obligations and of any criminal charge against him.

Article 11:

(1) Everyone charged with a penal offence has the right to be presumed innocent until proved guilty according to law in a public trial at which he has had all the guarantees necessary for his defence.
(2) No one shall be held guilty of any penal offence on account of any act or omission **which did not constitute a penal offence**, under national or international law, at the time when it was committed. Nor shall a heavier penalty be imposed than the one that was applicable at the time the penal offence was committed.

Article 12:

No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to attacks upon his honour and reputation. Everyone has the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks.

Article 13:

(1) Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each State.
(2) Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country.

Article 14:

(1) Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution.
(2) This right may not be invoked in the case of prosecutions genuinely arising from non-political crimes or from acts contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations.

Article 15:

(1) Everyone has the right to a nationality.
(2) No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his nationality nor denied the right to change his nationality.

Article 16:

(1) Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family. They are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution.

(2) Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses.

(3) The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State.

Article 17:

(1) Everyone has the right to own property alone as well as in association with others.

(2) No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his property.

Article 18:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

Article 19:

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

Article 20:

(1) Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association.

(2) No one may be compelled to belong to an association.

Article 21:

(1) Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives.

(2) Everyone has the right to equal access to public service in his country.

(3) The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.

Article 22:

Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to realization, through national effort and international cooperation and in accordance with the organization and resources of each State, of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality

Article 23:

(1) Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment.

(2) Everyone, without any discrimination, has the right to equal pay for equal work.

(3) Everyone who works has the right to just and favourable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection.

(4) Everyone has the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his interests.

Article 24:

Everyone has the right to rest and leisure, including reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays with pay.

Article 25:

(1) Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and wellbeing of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.

(2) Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. All children, whether born in or out of wedlock, shall enjoy the same social protection.

Article 26:

(1) Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.

(2) Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.

(3) Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.

Article 27:

(1) Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.

(2) Everyone has the right to the protections of the moral and material interests resulting from any scientific, literary or artistic production of which he is the author.

Article 28:

Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realized.

Article 29:

(1) Everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible.

(2) In the exercise of his rights and freedoms, everyone shall be subject only to such limitations as are determined by law solely for the purpose of securing due recognition and respect for the rights and freedoms of others and of meeting the just requirements of morality, public order and the general welfare in a democratic society.

(3) These rights and freedoms may in no case be exercised contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations.

Article 30:

Nothing in this Declaration may be interpreted as implying for any State, group or person any right to engage in any activity or to perform any act aimed at the destruction of any of the rights and freedoms set forth herein.

Appendix 3: What is Humanism? by A C Grayling

In its contemporary sense, 'humanism' denotes a family of views about the nature of ethics and the well-lived and responsible life. It relates the question of value – of what matters in life – to human realities in the here and now, and seeks all the materials for enjoining and living good and flourishing lives in the human condition itself.

Humanism is premised on the idea that ethics and social policy must be based on our best understanding of human nature and human circumstances. It is a concern to draw the best from, and make the best of, human life in the frame of human lifetimes, in the real world, and in sympathetic accord with the facts of humanity in the world. By immediate implication, therefore, it rejects transcendentalist claims about the source of value and morality, in particular those associated with religion. It is not the same thing as either secularism and atheism, but it has a natural affinity with both and especially the former.

The key point in regard to humanism is that it is an attitude to ethics based on the responsible use of reason, observation and debate focused upon human realities in the actual world, seeking the best and most constructive way of thinking and acting within it.

Although the word 'humanism' has a relatively short and complex history, the main current meaning given in the preceding paragraphs applies to the great ethical tradition stemming from classical Greek antiquity, older by over half a millennium than Christianity, and older by a thousand years than Islam, and much richer and deeper than either. It is, in short, the tradition of ethical debate in philosophy. This tradition has been the mainstay of Western ethics, for it provides the chief content even of applied Christian ethics, having been borrowed by the Christian Church when, after the expected Parousia failed to occur and seemed to have been postponed sine die, it proved necessary to adopt the substantialities of the Greek ethical schools (not least Stoicism) along with much metaphysics (in the form of Neoplatonism). The process of habituating Greek philosophical ideas into Christianity was completed by the Schoolmen of the late medieval period, chief among them Aquinas, who borrowed notably from Aristotle, whose *Nicomachean Ethics* is a classic of humanistic thought.

In the Renaissance the rediscovery of classical letters prompted a spirit of learning that was broader, fresher, more open and humane than the narrow theological obsessions that had dominated the late middle ages. This movement of Renaissance humanism, sometimes called 'literary humanism', was chiefly concerned with the study and enjoyment of the humanities.

At this time it was possible for more enlightened people to enjoy the classics and the wider perspective they afforded, while retaining their religious faith; hence the slightly hybrid term 'religious humanism' which some with more interest in the first word than the second strive to put into currency. There is an outstanding example of a true 'religious humanist,' however; Erasmus of Rotterdam, who for a while was highly influential in the culture of Europe, though doubtless his writings had the effect of weaning many away from the narrow confines of religious orthodoxy, a prospect much feared by orthodoxy's guardians. Because the delights of classical literature always threatened to liberate minds in this way, both the Roman and the reformed churches in the sixteenth century endeavoured to suppress interest in the classics, and to substitute something more acceptable. Sebastian Castellio's translation of parts of the Bible into beautiful Ciceronian Latin became a classic in its own right for this reason, because it provided schoolboys with a good Latin model without undermining their morals, as the works of Ovid and Virgil were thought to do.

In the United States some Unitarian and Universalist groups like to call themselves humanists, as to all practical purposes they are; real humanists often remark that such folk take religion out of religion while retaining the name, using 'religion' as a misnomer for 'attitude to life' or as somehow akin to its metaphorical use in 'football is his religion'. Either way the usage merely introduces confusion where there is no need for it, given that the premise of humanism, as described above, is that the most important of all

questions, the ethical question of how we should live, is to be answered by appeal to facts about human nature in the real world, and not from supposedly sacred ancient scriptures, transcendental revelations, or religious or supernaturalistic teachings of any kind.

Non-religious humanism, given its first full expression in the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, is functionally the basis of the triumph of the West in the succeeding two centuries in science, technology, progress in human rights and systems of government, and conceptions of the rights of man. That is a great achievement. The terrible tribulations to which humanity subjected itself in the same period are largely attributable to efforts to resist the growth of these Enlightenment attitudes towards the individual and society, by means either of reasserting or reinventing monolithic ideologies purporting to be guardians of a truth to which all must subscribe on pain of penalty. The Church had been such a monolith, exercising hegemony over the minds and imaginations of all; Nazism and Stalinism likewise opposed the pluralism, individualism, freedom of thought, and conceptions of the rule of law and dispensations of rights, that the emergence of modern history opposed to the old tyrannies of church and crown.

One of the largest influences on Renaissance humanism, as implied above, was the writings of Cicero, both for the beauty of their language and their rich matter. Erasmus said that whenever he read Cicero's *On Old Age* he felt like kissing the book, and thought the great Roman should be called "St. Cicero". Cicero was also Petrarch's favourite, and others among his admirers took an oath never to write Latin in any but Cicero's way, and with any but Cicero's vocabulary.

But the Renaissance valued Cicero not merely for his style but his humanism – in our modern sense of the word today – expressed as belief in the value of the human individual. He argued that individuals should be autonomous, free to think for themselves and possessed of rights that define their responsibilities; and that all men are brothers: "There is nothing so like anything else as we are to one another," he wrote in *On Laws*, adding that "the whole foundation of the human community" is the bond between individuals, which he said should consist in "kindness, generosity, goodness and justice." The endowment of reason confers on people a duty to develop themselves fully, he said, and to treat one another with generosity and respect. This outlook remains the ideal of contemporary humanism today.

In contrast to the claimed certainties of faith, a humanist has a more modest conception of the nature and current extent of knowledge. All the enquiries that human intelligence conducts into enlarging knowledge make progress always at the expense of generating new questions. Having the intellectual courage to live with this open-endedness and uncertainty, trusting to reason and experiment to gain increments of understanding, having the integrity to base one's theories on rigorous and testable foundations, and being committed to changing one's mind when shown to be wrong, are the marks of honest minds.

In the past humanity was eager to clutch at beliefs to attain quick and simple closure on all that they did not know or understand. Humanism recognises this historical fact about the old myths, and sympathises with the needs that drive people in that direction. It points out to such that what feeds their hearts and minds – love, beauty, music, sunshine on the sea, the sound of rain on leaves, the company of friends, the satisfaction that comes from successful effort – is more than the imaginary can ever give them, and that they should learn to redescribe these things – the real things of this world – as what gives life the poetry of its significance.

For that is what humanism is: it is, to repeat, about the value of things human. Its desire to learn from the past, its exhortation to courage in the present, and its espousal of hope for the future, are about real things, real people, real human need and possibility, and the fate of the fragile world we share. It is about human life; it requires no belief in an after life. It is about this world; it requires no belief in another world.. It requires no commands from divinities, no promises of reward or threats of punishment, no myths and rituals, either to make sense of things or to serve as a prompt to the ethical life. It requires only open eyes, sympathy, and reason.

Humanist ideas in this fundamental sense are not restricted to the Western tradition. They are central also in Confucianism and in the ancient tradition of non-theistic ethical schools of India. Indeed one good way of indicating the sources of humanism is to sample the range of authors who would figure essentially in a study of the humanistic tradition: they include Confucius, Thucydides, Epicurus, Mencius, Cicero, Lucretius, Seneca, both Plinys, Plutarch, Epictetus, Aurelius, Ibn Rushd, Averroes, Montaigne, Bruno, Spinoza, Voltaire, Meselier, Hume, Diderot, D'Holbach, Adam Smith, Edward Gibbon, Thomas Paine, Mary Woolstonecraft, Condorcet, Bentham, Godwin, Shelley, Schopenhauer, Heine, Comte, Mill, Darwin, Spencer, Marx, Renan, TH Huxley, Leslie Stephen, Andrew Dickson White, Moncure Conway, George Eliot, Charles Bradlaugh, Robert Ingersoll, Mark Twain, Samuel Butler, WEH Lecky, John Morley, Nietzsche, WK Clifford, GW Foote, Freud, Dewey, JB Bury, Bertrand Russell, Gilbert Murray, Chapman Cohen, GE Moore, Einstein, EM Forster, HL Mencken, Sir Julian Huxley, MN Roy, Barbara Wootton, Sydney Hook, HJ Blackham, Jean Paul Sartre, AJ Ayer, Peter Medawar, Jacob Bronowski, Bernard Williams.

All these figures shared a fundamental premise: that the human good is for human responsibility to discern and enact without invocation of or reliance upon any of the many belief systems of religion which claim a transcendental source of instruction and a posthumous dispensation of reward or punishment for obeying or failing to obey that instruction. That, as the essence of humanism, is the starting point for discussion about how people should live and behave, and how they should construct good societies.

As a broad and powerful tradition of ethical thought, extraordinarily rich in insight, debate, and insistence on human responsibility for ethics and society, and which is universally inclusive – involving no sectarian divisions, no supernaturalism, no rituals and taboos, no food and dress codes, and carrying no history of sectarian strife and bloodshed – humanism is not only a strikingly positive outlook, but necessary for today's world. For humanism emphasises the value of the human individual and the central importance of good relations between individuals. It argues that individuals should be autonomous, free to think for themselves and possessed of rights that define their responsibilities; and that all men are brothers. Its text might be taken from Cicero: "There is nothing so like anything else as we are to one another," he wrote in *On Laws*, adding that "the whole foundation of the human community" is the bond between individuals, which should consist in "kindness, generosity, goodness and justice." The endowment of reason confers on people a duty to develop themselves fully and to treat one another with generosity and respect. This outlook is the ideal of contemporary humanism.

Evaluation

What parts of the course were most useful to you?

Why?

Which bits did you enjoy least?

Why?

What could we do to make the course more enjoyable in the future?

Would you recommend this course to others?

Would you be interested in pursuing humanism in the future?

Do you identify yourself as a humanist? If not, please state your affiliation, if any.